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ABSTRACT

Community colleges generally conduct little research. Further, there is no generally accepted national research agenda for community colleges, no consistently funded national agency charged with studying the institutions as unique entities, and few educational researchers directing their attention toward them. The research that is undertaken on community colleges is conducted primarily by university professors and students, state agencies mandated by legislation, the Department of Education, in addition to a few institutional researchers at colleges. The types of research conducted include treatments of the formation and development of the colleges from the viewpoint of history or sociology and large-scale data compilations providing overviews of trends. In addition, the more useful qualitative studies undertaken provide information on the peculiarities of college functioning through participant observation or interview techniques. The lack of a consistent funding base for the routine collection of data on institutional effectiveness and unfamiliarity with assessment are central barriers to community college research. Finally, whatever the source and forms it takes, research on community colleges suffers several limitations stemming from imprecision in the language of the social sciences and from the relationships between researchers and practitioners. (TGI)

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Digest

May 1996

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Community College Scholarship

by Arthur M. Cohen and Florence B. Brawer

Community colleges usually conduct little research. There is no generally accepted national research agenda for community colleges, no consistently funded national agency charged with studying the institutions as unique entities, and few educational researchers directing their attention towards them. Some studies of community college functioning are undertaken by university-based analysts, national organizations (primarily federally sponsored), state agencies, and researchers within the colleges. These studies take several forms: historical and sociological analyses; data compilations; and qualitative studies. This digest reviews the groups that conduct these studies, the types of research they report, and issues in community college scholarship.

Sources of Research

Most extramural studies of community colleges are conducted by university professors and students in social sciences, most of them in schools of education. Fewer than one hundred professors are exclusively concerned with teaching and writing about community colleges. Graduate students working under their direction collect original data or, more likely, write theses based on existing data sets. Professors further stimulate study of the colleges by seeking research grants for special topics; serving on extramural commissions; and advising local, state, and national agencies regarding research directions.

In recent years, several state agencies have been mandated by legislation to conduct research on community colleges. Their efforts vary: some states have sophisticated research offices; in others the community college systems cooperate closely in compiling and reporting data. However, in half the states, cross-institutional research is sporadic or nonexistent.

Research on the national level centers in the U.S. Department of Education. Its National Center for Education Statistics sponsors the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which includes a comprehensive compilation of data on the number of community colleges, revenues, costs, enrollment, degrees conferred, and staff.

Institutional research in the colleges manifests a pattern ranging from the sophisticated to the rudimentary. Except in a few colleges, it has never been well supported. Knapp (1979) found institutional research offices typically staffed with only one or two persons. Many colleges assign specific research tasks ad hoc to certain staff members who may be released temporarily from other duties. Understaffed as they are, the institutional research offices produce a sizable number of reports useful not only to their own colleges but also to the analyst seeking fine data about program effects. Types of reports produced include community surveys, academic validation studies, placement and testing program evaluations, studies of student aspirations, program reviews, comparative studies, and outcomes studies.

Forms of Research

Several treatments of the formation and development of the community colleges have been written from the viewpoint of history or sociology. Those with an historical bent look for documentation and details of the founding of individual institutions, hoping that when such examples are strung together, a picture of nationwide institutional formation will emerge. The sociologists usually work from the top down, seeking to link institutional formation with broad social forces and with theories of institutional formation. These analyses have served to fill a gap in the research on community colleges.

Even though large-scale data compilations obscure information about single colleges, they provide useful overviews. The National Center for Education Statistics collects data on all sectors and publishes numerous reports; many of them reflecting Congressional concerns such as loan default on federal financial aid and

affirmative action information. State agencies typically receive data from the colleges and publish statewide aggregates regarding college expenditures, graduation rates, staff salaries, and student attributes. However, comprehensive data are available in only a few states and, because of variant definitions, interstate comparisons are not warranted.

A few qualitative studies appear in the literature each year. The more useful studies provide information on the peculiarities of college functioning through participant observation or interview techniques in which the students and staff members talk about institutional and personal issues.

Issues

Unfortunately, the information useful for a more complete picture of community college contributions is not being compiled regularly. The American Association of Community Colleges (1994) pointed to some of the gaps by citing several core indicators of effectiveness, including student persistence, satisfaction, and goal attainment; transfer and job placement numbers and success ratios; literacy and citizenship skill development; and college relationships with the community. Absent a consistent funding base, routine collection of such data across all institutions is not likely to develop.

Unfamiliarity with assessment is a central issue. Ewell (1987) has discussed many of the problems in implementing assessment programs, showing that often no one on campus knows what assessment is or what its consequences will be. Many other reasons why assessment has not been widely adopted have been advanced, including the uncertain feasibility of measuring important outcomes, the limited time or money available to implement a testing program, the tendency for the faculty to teach primarily what the test will measure, the risk of outsiders' misusing the information gained, and the students' unwillingness to cooperate in a process that has no relevance to them. But all these objections can be overcome if an institution's leaders and at least a portion of the faculty want to pursue the process.

Whatever the source and the forms it takes, research on community colleges suffers several limitations stemming from imprecision in the language of the social sciences and from the relationships between researchers and practitioners. Moreover, there is no such thing as unbiased scholarship. The answers that research can yield, the data that must be gathered, the analyses that can be made, and the reports that are distributed all have different configurations depending on the nature of the questions, who asked them, and the type of response that will satisfy the petitioner.

Conclusion

The meager support for research on community colleges is not surprising because research in education does not nearly reflect the schools' importance to American life. However, much information about the colleges is available, even if it must be sifted from a mass of reportage that includes self-congratulatory commentary, data compiled with little regard for relevance, unwarranted criticism based on selected statistics, and incomplete compilations.

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